

A gem contributed by Mr Houston. sjg

PUNCH, August 4 1954

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THE COMMISSAR (After Niccolo Machiavelli)

TO extend the power and influence of his government, a Commissar should, in his stratagems, as far as possible eschew engaging his own soldiery. This can readily be achieved by persuading others that their own cause—whether of “national liberation” or some other ostensibly popular enterprise—will be advanced by falling in with his purposes. Thus they will shed their blood, and he will collect the fruits of victory.

Furthermore, he can, in due course, take credit for ending hostilities which, in fact, he initiated. This will be the easier and the more profitable if he goes through the motions of negotiating a settlement and of making concessions. As he will have no intention of observing the settlement, and as the concessions will be without substance, great advantages must accrue from this procedure.

Happy and fortunate is the Commissar who finds himself dealing with vain and feeble men. In that they are vain, they will go to any lengths to be able to persuade themselves and their countrymen that they are subtle and resolute enough to negotiate successfully with him where others have failed; in that they are feeble, they may be relied upon ever to withdraw before the possibility of having to resort to armed intervention.

The prestige that these men acquire from being able thus to parade themselves as adroit and firm negotiators is entirely to the Commissar's interest. To sustain their prestige they must keep alive the illusion that they have negotiated rather than surrendered, and that the Commissar is a man of reason and integrity. For this purpose they will both falsify what has happened, in the sense of minimizing what the Commissar has gained and what they

have relinquished, their credit and abuse any among their own people who show an inclination to disparage their achievement.

Nor should the Commissar fear that a deception once used cannot be repeated. On the contrary, he can continue to use it again and again, confident that vanity and fear will ever generate credulity, and that each new dupe will suppose that in his particular case undertakings will be scrupulously fulfilled and that professions of friendship and pacific intentions are seriously intended.

In the case of a truly powerful enemy, the Commissar must first isolate him. This can best be done by detaching his associates, all of whom will naturally feel resentment at their subordinate position and envy of their dominant partner. By persuading them, severally or together, that he holds them in particular esteem, the Commissar can easily ensure that such strength as they may command is rendered ineffectual. He will then be well placed either to come to terms with the now isolated powerful enemy at the expense of the weaker associates he has lured away, or to embark upon hostilities on highly advantageous terms. In either case, he has benefited.

In working out this strategy the Commissar is under no necessity to hide his true intentions. Experience shows that the more vociferously and explicitly he proclaims them the less likely are they to be taken seriously. Great conquests can be made after being announced in advance, and pre-ordained victims will easily be persuaded to receive without effective resistance the punishment they have been told in advance is coming to them.

Above all, although the Commissar must be constant in professing his fidelity to engagements and his pacific intentions, he need never concern himself about the consequences of behaving in an exactly contrary sense. Every time he breaks an agreement, he may be confident that a new one extending the advantages he derived from the old will be eagerly sought. The more offensive he is in speech and ruthless in action, the greater will be the value put upon any ostensibly mild, conciliatory action in which he may engage.

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